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“The Immortal Memory”

Speech Delivered by

MR. JOHN FOORD

at the Annual Dinner of the
Burns Society of the City of New York
at Delmonico's

January 25, 1916

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“The Immortal Memory”

Speech Delivered by Mr. John Foord at the Annual Dinner
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“Burns, thou should'st be living at this hour; the world hath need of thee!” So might we paraphrase Wordsworth's invocation to Milton, forgetting that Burns is living at this hour; that his spirit is a vital force in the minds and hearts of many more thousands of his fellow-men than he ever addressed in his lifetime. In the trenches on the far-flung battle-line, and on the grim guardians of Britain's sea power, the very tones of his voice have sounded to-day in the ears of tens of thousands of the men in whose hands rests the future of human freedom. So, in all the years in which we have celebrated the birthday of Robert Burns, there has been none in which the undying and indestructible influence of the man we honor has been so manifest as it is at this present hour. Throughout all the years in which a response has been made to “The Immortal Memory” there has been none in which the message he delivered to Scotland and the world bore so intimate a relation to the cause of liberty which he so passionately loved, and to the service of that human brotherhood which was the thinker's inspiration and the poet's dream. For this man was not only the greatest of Scotsmen; he was Scotland's epitome, and the spirit that animates the Briton of to-day is one that was born and nurtured among the hills and straths of Caledonia. The most imperative of its moods is a sentiment finer than any that springs merely from the sense of duty, broader than is derived from the love of home,—a sentiment that is informed by the enthusiasm of humanity and quickened by the divine ardor at whose prompting man stands ready to die for man,

“to venture life and love and youth,
For the great prize of death in battle.”

In this cataclysm of which we are awe-struck spectators, in which all that is fiendish, no less than all that is godlike,

in our common humanity stands revealed, men and nations have stripped themselves of the disguises they had grown accustomed to wear. The savage, heretofore masquerading under the cloak of "kultur," stands forth plain savage, with all his primal instincts unmodified and unrefined, naked and unashamed. On the other hand, in the practical, prudent and peace-loving descendant of generations of born fighters, there has been awakened the tingling joy of combat that his fathers knew, and because of the priceless boon of independence that is his native heritage, there has come to him the stern resolve, if die he must, to die the death of a freeman, struggling that those who come after him may be free.

This is the Scottish spirit that found its noblest expression and its most characteristic interpretation in the poetry of Burns. Centuries went to the making of the impulses which culminated in the genius of Scotland's own inspired bard, and while Scottish blood courses in the veins of men there never will be a time when the echoes of his voice will fail to produce a sympathetic throb in the Scottish heart or to lend a new and fervid quickening to the motions of the Scottish mind. His nature held no deeper or stronger feeling than that of devotion to the memory of the heroes who had led his country's long struggle for independence. As a boy he explored every den and dell of the Leglen wood which had sheltered Sir William Wallace, with as much enthusiasm he said as ever pilgrim felt toward Loretto. Even then his heart glowed with a wish to be able to make a song on Wallace—a wish unfulfilled save for this noble stanza:

"At Wallace' name what Scottish blood
But boils up in a spring-time flood!
Oft have our fearless fathers strode
 By Wallace' side,
Still pressing onward, red-wat-shod,
 Or glorious died."

But who shall say that, in its largest sense, the wish was not fulfilled when he gave to the world "Scots wha hae' wi' Wallace bled"—the greatest war-ode ever penned by man?

While the martial note is by no means the dominant one

in the poetry or the songs of Robert Burns, they are interpenetrated with the love of freedom. And that is true of all our Scottish singers. In the very dawn of our national poetry, in the fourteenth century, John Barbour, the Archdeacon of Aberdeen, wrote one of the noblest panegyrics on freedom to be found in any literature—freedom without which “a noble heart may have nane ease,” “freedom mair to prize than all the gold in warld that is.” The same note was struck by Dunbar, Blind Harry, Robert Henryson and Gavin Douglas in the morning of Scottish song, as loudly and clearly as it was by Burns in its high noon. In this fervent love of freedom, the Scottish poets of all the centuries join hands, simply because they were Scotsmen, and to have had any sentiment out of accord with that one would have marked them as unworthy of their motherland. Sir Walter expresses the passion in its purest and most exalted terms; lesser men like Henry Scott Riddell in its most aggressive, as thus:

“They tell o’ lands wi’ brighter skies,
Where freedom’s voice ne’er rang;
Gie me the hills where Ossian lies,
And Coila’s minstrel sang;
For I’ve nae skill o’ lands, my lads,
That kenna to be free;
Then Scotland’s right and Scotland’s might
And Scotland’s hills for me.”

In like vein is Robert Nicoll’s:

“Where the caller breezes sweep
Across the mountain’s breast,
Where the free in soul are nurst
Is the land that we lo’e best.”

But why multiply examples? The truth I am proclaiming is a commonplace to every Scotsman here, because we imbibed the passion for liberty with our mother’s milk. Burns had it before he read as a boy the paraphrase of Blind Harry’s Story of Wallace, which he says “poured a tide of Scottish prejudice into his veins which will boil there till the floodgates of life shut in eternal rest.” He had it, too, like most men of his race in all the ages, closely associated with a deep and abiding love for the

land of his birth. It was from his heart that the invocation came:

“O Scotia! my dear, my native soil!
For whom my warmest wish to Heaven is sent!
Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil
Be bless’d with health, and peace, and sweet content!”

And from the heart, too, most emphatically came the avowal:

“Even then a wish, I mind its power,
A wish that to my latest hour
Shall strongly heave my breast,
That I, for puir auld Scotland’s sake
Some usefu’ plan or book could make,
Or sing a sang at least!”

“Or sing a sang at least!” It seemed to him as if he could do so little for his country, and yet he would gladly have done all. Quite unconsciously, however, he was doing to his native land, to the United Kingdom, to the British Empire that was then, and that was to be, a service not less enduring than that of the men who were piloting the bark of state through the most stormy and perilous time of all its history. The achievement of the statesmen must be reckoned incomparably a greater one than the writing of a song, but the fame of the song-writer may stand the ordeal of time better than that of the statesman, if the song have in it a spirit that never dies. Strange as it would have sounded in their own time, the tenant farmer of Mossiel, the gauger at Dumfries, supplies in the hour of his country’s need to-day an inspiration which nor Pitt, nor Fox, nor Burke, nor Sheridan can provide. There might seem to be a touch of the miraculous in that, were it not a familiar fact in human experience that the forces which move the world are those that strongly and deeply move men’s souls.

It was from his heart and soul that Burns wrote; no poet ever spoke in tones of such perfect sincerity; no poet ever subordinated himself so absolutely to the desire he had to serve, as best he could, his native land. Burns did not stop to inquire how much or how little his native land had done for him, still less to try to drive a bargain with her on the principle of give and take. It was enough

for him that this was the land of his fathers, and that he was the heir of her glorious memories; nay, even a humble successor of those nameless old song-writers who could feel so strongly and describe so well; enough for him that he had been born amid

“Auld Coila’s plains and fells,
Her moors red-brown wi’ heather bells,
Her banks and braes, her dens and dells,
Where glorious Wallace
Aft bure the gree, as story tells
Frae southron billies.”

Here was a land that a man might proudly die for, if need were, but to which the best immediate service that a rustic bard could render was to conserve her native music, and add to the store of her treasure-house of song. And so, for the mere love of the thing, and without fee or reward, ungrudgingly he worked day and night for the last nine years of his life to furnish appropriate words for the old airs of Scotland, and he died with the pen in his hand.

He was keenly aware that there was much in the political institutions of Great Britain, particularly in what he called “a system of corruption between the executive power and the representative part of the legislature,” that urgently needed amendment. He said this in reply to a reproof for overmuch freedom of speech that had been administered to him by his employers, the Board of Excise, and he took the risk it involved for this among other reasons: “I have three sons, who I see already have brought into the world souls ill qualified to inhabit the bodies of slaves.” But that did not tend to weaken the fierce outburst of patriotic fervor of his lines to the Dumfries volunteers, where his differentiation only makes his defiance of Britain’s foes more energetic:

“The kettle o’ the kirk and state
Perhaps a claut may fail in’t;
But deil a foreign tinkler loon
Shall ever ca’ a nail in’t.
Our fathers’ bluid the kettle bought
And wha wad dare to spoil it
By Heaven! the sacrilegious dog
Shall fuel be to boil it.”

That may not be great poetry, but it is the embodiment of sober patriotic sense, and has the sound of a trumpet call to battle. But the strain is of a higher mood that has rung in the ears of the tens of thousands of Scotsmen who have flocked to the colors so that their percentage of enlistment became the highest in the British Empire:

“By oppression’s woes and pains,
By your sons in servile chains,
We will drain our dearest veins
 But they shall be free.
Lay the proud usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty’s in every blow!
 Let us do, or die!”

To the humblest of the Scottish recruits these lines were familiar as household words: to the least devout of them it was second nature to say with the man who was inspired to write them: “So may God defend the cause of truth and liberty as he did that day.”

And here we strike the larger theme—“The cause of truth and liberty,” which embraces indeed your country’s independence and your own freedom, but to which conceivably your heart and soul may be dead when it transcends the area of your local patriotism. It is strongly characteristic of Burns that his enthusiasm for liberty owned no such narrow limitations. The man who could proclaim himself the “poor, earth-born companion an’ fellow-mortal” of the field-mouse, whose heart could feel a pang for “the ourie cattle, or silly sheep wha bide this brattle o’ winter war,” was not the man whose ardent sympathy could fail to be aroused for men struggling to be free, from whatever land or race they might have sprung. It may be that in this matter Scotsmen have been gifted with a larger view because of the influence of Burns. It is certain that their fervid patriotism, so far from expending itself on its immediate object, has prompted them to spring to the defense of the larger issue—the all-embracing cause. Their blood has already reddened the soil of the old battlefield in Flanders where their fathers fought, and the end is not yet in sight. But there can be only one end to a struggle in which such a cause brings to

its defense men animated by such a spirit. One would be tempted to doubt the continued existence of the balance of the universal scheme of creation, if a flagrant defiance of the first principles of right and justice should be crowned with success; if barbarity should oust humanity; if truth, compassion and brotherhood can safely be rejected as attributes of men. Burns lived in a time when Satanic influences had also their hour of triumph, and he encountered in his life glaring instances enough of man's inhumanity to man. But his faith did not waver either in the future of his country's freedom or in the ultimate supremacy of the noblest aspirations of the race:

"Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a' that;
That sense and worth o'er a' the earth
May bear the gree, and a' that.
For a' that, and a' that,
It's coming yet, for a' that,
That man to man the warld o'er
Shall brothers be for a' that."

That conviction has come to be part of the every-day thought of the plain, ordinary Scotsman; it belongs to the very fibre and distinctive cast of his mind. But that, too, like the intensity of the love of country which he shares with Burns and with generations of ancestry of whom Burns was the natural heir, needed the endowment of a vivid imagination to make it a spring of action. I think you will agree with me that it is largely because of the quickness with which they respond to the imaginative impulse that so many Scotsmen are in the forefront of the struggle which convulses the world to-day—that they have been the readiest among Britons to discern the real issues of that gigantic conflict, and the most willing to lay down their lives that freedom may not perish from the earth and mere brute force reign supreme among men. It was to this imagination that Burns made his appeal, and he did it so successfully that Emerson could truthfully say: "The confession of Augsburg, the Declaration of Independence, the French Rights of Man and the Marseillaise, are not more weighty documents in the history of freedom than the songs of Burns."

It will be the part of history to place a true valuation

on what the British Empire owes to the spirit that possessed Burns—a spirit that will live in the breasts of men of Scottish blood while his memory endures. I have steadily contended that the sentiment which holds the Empire together has nothing to do with questions of tariff or trade. When Canada, Australia and New Zealand send many more men to fight for the Empire than it was thought possible before this war for the United Kingdom itself to equip for service abroad, it is in obedience to something higher than a merely commercial prompting. For an Empire that comprises one-fifth of the human family and occupies about the same proportion of the habitable surface of the globe, which, if it is to be united at all, must be bound together by a sentiment which the Malay of the Federated States shares with the Canadian, the Jamaica negro with the New Zealander, the Hottentot in his kraal with the denizen of Mayfair, the enthusiasm of the bagman will not take the place of a soul. If citizenship of Rome were valued as a proud distinction even by the Apostle of the Gentiles, think you that citizenship of a greater, juster and more beneficent Empire shall not be cherished for its own sake by all her sons? Colonial patriotism need not die to make way for this feeling, any more than Scottish patriotism has died. Love for the land of our birth, be it ever so intense, pride in the deeds of her sons, be it ever so conscious, merely tend to exalt the love and pride that are stirred by the greater entity of which the land is merely a part. Nay, more—unless you have the one I cannot think it possible you will be richly endowed with the other. If the blood does not leap in a' your veins as you read Scott's noble apostrophe beginning, "Lives there the man with soul so dead?" I cannot believe that your breast will greatly swell as you think how freedom's banner streams like a thunder cloud against the wind in Armageddon. Nor can I imagine that the reflection will ever occur to you that the vital principles of human freedom are as clearly at stake in the battlefields of Europe to-day as they were at Marathon and Salamis, and that the defeat of the Allies would mean the eclipse of all civilization worthy of the name as surely as the defeat of the Greeks would have meant twenty-four hundred years ago.

And the people of this our adopted land, composite of all races but always closer akin to our own, whose pulses quicken at the strains of "Scots wha hae," and all the breadth of whose human sympathy responds to the sentiment of "A man's a man for a' that," think you that they can be indifferent spectators of the shifting fortunes of the battle-shock between the highest and the lowest of human ideals? This Republic has flourished and grown great because it has given to men of all nations, kindreds and tongues, the priceless boon of opportunity, and its crowning glory is that step by step with its growth in wealth and power there has gone on, through its agency and influence, the betterment and the elevation of humanity. Even the hyphenated citizen who abuses the hospitality of the United States to conspire against its peace, conducts his plotting under the aegis of that inherited British freedom which Caledonia nursed and of which Burns sang—of that equal justice which the fathers of this Republic were taught to revere because it rested on the strongest bulwark ever fashioned against tyranny, the common law of England. We may falter and falter, and temporize as we will, but the struggle is ours also, and with its issue is bound up our very existence as a free people. It was with a clear vision that Robert Burns hailed in George Washington the architect of an edifice of human freedom worthy of the admiration of Scotsmen. It will be a dull and purblind generation that finds in the counsel of Washington reason for standing idly by while the very existence of the principles that triumphed with Washington is at stake.

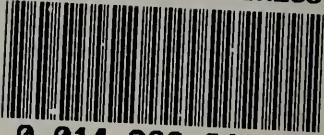
I do not seek to intrude here within the domain of statesmanship, and I have no indictment to bring against the men who have had to deal with a situation of exceptional delicacy and difficulty. My purpose is to prove that the cult of freedom, of which our national poet was a veritable high priest, has moulded the character of our Scottish race and helped to fan to a white heat the devotion to liberty of men and nations to-day. Partakers of the exaltation of mind and spirit which this world-struggle has generated, our American people are not yet. But it is not too much to say that their thoughts are slowly broadening

as they gaze, and I feel that they, too, will have a higher and clearer outlook as they realize that there has passed over our people in the old home, as with a breath of the Divine spirit, a marvelous transformation of soul. I am not making a too partial claim when I say that this transformation is in the line of spiritual succession from the national consciousness of which Burns was the greatest exemplar. In the new note that has been sounded in the English poetry of to-day, there is an echo of both the feeling and method of our national bard, and he who gave promise of being the greatest English poet of our time had much in common with Robert Burns. Untimely cut off at twenty-seven, a martyr to the cause of which he, easily and naturally, became the laureate, Rupert Brooke is one fitted to command the homage of every lover of Burns, than whom of all the poets that have gone before none would have so sincerely appreciated and so warmly extolled these lines:

“Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead !
There’s none of those so lonely and poor or old,
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold,
These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,
That men call age; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

“Blow, bugles, blow ! They brought us, for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honor has come back, as a king, to earth
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.”

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